

Withholding and/or Withdrawing Nutrition and Hydration

Will death be hastened if the patient stops eating and IVs and/or tube feedings are not used?

While eventually a person will die without food or fluid, hospice workers have observed that the patient who stops eating and drinking altogether, lives much longer than expected.

Usually death will occur within days or weeks of ceasing intake. Several studies have actually documented those terminal patients who are not given artificial hydration actually live longer than those who are hydrated.

Survival time should not be the focus. The primary concern should be the comfort level of the patient while alive.

It is more important to achieve comfort than to prolong life or the dying process. Food and fluid are needed to live, not to die.

Is it considered suicide to refuse nutrition and hydration or considered euthanasia to not provide it?

No. It is a natural part of the dying process to decrease intake of food and fluid. There is no compelling reason to provide or accept technology for treatment. When this occurs, death is a result of the disease, not the absence of food and/or fluid intake.

It is important to stress that giving food and fluid has a symbolic importance of love and nurturing.

It is difficult for caregivers and family members to accept the natural process of decreased food and/or intake during the dying process.

Stress that one should not feel powerless because one cannot provide nourishment in the form of food and fluid.

One can continue to nourish the patient's mind and spirit with genuine loving words and gestures, pain control, intellectual stimulation, spiritual guidance, humor, etc. In this way, the goal of palliation will be achieved.

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